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Renouncing Sex in Counter-Reformation Munich

The rape of Europa, the Sabine women, Lucretia: Acts of sexual violence against women proliferate at the origins of state-building projects both in myth and in history. As Ulrike Strasser’s recent book argues, state power over women’s sexuality also figured at the political epicenter of “Germany’s first absolutist state,” Counter-Reformation Bavaria (p. 3). Over the course of five chapters, Strasser narrates a tale of increased state control over female bodies. The Catholic state’s containment strategies were two-fold. Women, especially under the rule of Maximilian I, could have sex within marriage or not have sex at all. This virginal group—women who chose to renounce sex to take holy orders or women who were forced to renounce sex to avoid increasingly harsh legal penalties—lies at the heart of Strasser’s project.

For the past several decades, historians of early modern Germany have fruitfully investigated the specter of female sexuality haunting the minds of both Protestant and Catholic reformers. The ways in which marriage functioned to contain these anxieties is now broadly understood, if less well so for the German Catholic than Protestant context. (Here Strasser’s book makes an important contribution.) So too can we now discern the ways in which patriarchal households comprised the political bedrock of state power. Thanks to these studies, the gendered dimensions of the nascent public sphere are now more broadly understood. Less well-understood are Catholic states’ political uses of virginity and the lives of those women who remained unmarried, choosing or forced to renounce their (hetero)sexuality. (Here Strasser’s work is path-breaking.) Early modern virginity is, she argues, the flipside to marital chastity, and its political mobilization was equally important in the building of the Bavarian absolutist state as was marriage. As she succinctly states in the introductory chapter, “holy and female virginity ... was constitutive of the development of a modern-style, centralized government and the emergence of a public sphere” (p. 3).

The book is divided into two main parts: the first, comprised of two chapters, focuses on the years 1550 to 1600; the second, consisting of three chapters, is devoted to the Thirty Years’ War (1618 to 1648) and its aftermath. Written fluidly throughout, Strasser’s book should find many readers. Students of early modern confessionalization and state-building comprise an immediate and obvious audience. These readers may be particularly interested in Strasser’s demonstration that Catholicism was hardly antithetical to the establishment of the modern state as has often been assumed in the wake of Weber. Those teaching courses on early modern sex and gender may likewise wish to assign all or some of this book. While the book as a whole offers a compelling narrative arc, each chapter stands firmly on its own. (This reader particularly enjoyed the book’s final two chapters.) More generally, scholars keen to disrupt presentist conceptions of marriage and of the public/private divide will also find here much welcome material. The book is included in the series *Social History, Popular Culture, and Politics in*
Germany (edited by Geoff Eley). It is the first early modern topic to have been included there, a welcome sign that Germanists across disciplines recognize the need to account more fully for the early modern period in explorations of historical and literary modernity.

The book’s first chapter explores post-Tridentine marital doctrine and the Bavarian state’s ability to bring marriage firmly under secular control. Peculiar to Munich, Strasser argues, were the economic guarantees civic officials required to validate marriage. To obtain a marriage license, couples had to jump high economic hurdles and were required, for example, to prove joint ownership of property in excess of 100 Gulden and provide “between four and six local guarantors who vouched for their reliability in economic matters” (p. 53). Marriage, like citizenship, thus became the exclusive purview of the wealthy. Combing records of 191 cases in which women sued former lovers before Munich’s highest judge (Stadtoberrichter) between 1592 and 1651 (p. 92), Strasser traces an increasing criminalization of female extra-marital sexuality in the book’s second and third chapters and a narrowing circumscription of the legal discourse of female sexuality. As she states, “What did change over time was the legal meaning assigned to sexual relations and the range of judicially sanctioned stories about love relationships between men and women” (p. 99). A first group of virgins thus slowly came into view: “the discourse of profligacy led to a labeling of lower-class women as a source of moral pollution and therefore grave social danger. Hence, they were relegated to a state of virginity” (p. 113).

Written clearly throughout, the book gains considerable momentum in its final two chapters, both devoted to houses of women religious. The first of these explores the dynamics of enclosure primarily in Munich’s Pütrich and Ridler convents but also in that of the Poor Clares. Here, Strasser is at pains to elaborate “the enduring emancipatory potential of the Catholic ideal of virginity, which could enable women to utilize the space of the convent and their virginal bodies for their own purposes in spite of and, at times, in fact because of Tridentine enclosure” (p.120). While Strasser remains attentive to women’s abilities to appropriate and even resist the new discourse of femininity throughout the book, the nuns’ short-term tactics to subvert long-term state and ecclesiastic strategy are explored more thoroughly than are the tactics of poorer women.

The nuns’ various tactics may simply be better preserved in the historical record. Strasser makes ingenuous use of materials unearthed in convent archives now housed primarily in the Bavarian State Archives (Bayrisches Hauptstaatsarchiv). (These and other sources are enumerated in the volume’s comprehensive bibliography). But perhaps the economic resources and educational background at the disposal of this second group of virgins made them more able to resist state demands and to maintain some latitude in their behavior—even after Trent-inspired enclosure. Sister Clara Hortulana of the Poor Clares, for example, “turned into a virtual prayer broker, assigning spiritual works to nuns in her own and other convents, with her confessor serving as a go-between” (p. 133). The Pütrich sisters, under the leadership of Mother Superior Maria Gerold, conceived and carried out plans to attract more visitors to their church by procuring bodies of early Christian martyrs from Roman catacombs. The sisters prepared the bodies for public display, sewing radiant garments assembled through sale or donation of their own finest possessions, and “these sacred remains became an extension of self, if not virtually prosthetic bodies, for women whose own bodies had been barred from public view” (p. 145). Echoing the words of James Scott, Strasser cautions that these and other tactics were “weapons of the weak” (p. 128). And, at times in Strasser’s account, one is tempted to ask exactly in whose service weapons such as female bodily mortification stood. The same Sister Clara Hortulana, for example, achieved fervently desired martyrdom after “God allegedly took pity on her and permitted the devil to fling her down from the choir to a bloody death” (p. 146).

Female tactics of resistance to the ever narrowing circumscription of women’s spaces are also investigated in the book’s final chapter on Munich’s Institute of English Ladies and its foundress, Mary Ward. Their tactics of resistance are far less disquieting for a contemporary reader, and one senses for Strasser, than was Sister Clara Hortulana’s martyrdom. Ward, who arrived in Munich in 1626, refused to acknowledge women’s sole choice after Trent (aut murus aut maritus, either the convent walls or marriage) and insisted upon the legitimacy of the active life for women. Patterning her order after the Society of Jesus, this female Loyola believed women should become, in Ward’s own words, “female scholastics,” teachers in the service of the Catholic Reformation (p. 153). While the English Ladies were ultimately unable to realize Ward’s vision in its entirety, they were able to implement it in part after they abandoned their religious estate and won secular protection.

It was, Strasser emphasizes, a hard-won victory for
which the Ladies paid a high price. In 1635, Maximilian “sanctioned their pedagogical activity if they inculcated normative femininity in their pupils” (p. 161). By 1635, normative femininity had a marked class bias, as readers will remember from the book’s first half. Strasser cautions, however, against seeing in the English Ladies only class warriors in the service of the Bavarian state, arguing that “while the English Ladies accommodated themselves to the needs of state and society and contributed to the social reproduction of gender and class hierarchies, they also broadened the range of acceptable female identities” (p. 167). Their vanguard activities, in fact, smoothed the way for “the rise of the female teaching profession” at a time of shrinking work opportunities for women in Bavaria (p. 169).

Strasser’s book, it should now be clear, has prodigious strengths. The following complaint may be considered a mere cavil. Yet, with the book’s emphasis on the sexual renunciations forced on lower-class women and very possibly chosen by wealthier brides of Christ, a discussion of female sexual desire in general is strangely absent. Was there no discursive space whatsoever in early modern Munich for female-female sexual desire? Did nuns renounce sexuality, as Strasser’s book claims, or did they renounce heterosexual desire? While Strasser’s book carefully reveals nascent constructions of femininity and of masculinity, heterosexual desire remains oddly normative in her account of the political uses of female virginity. These questions, it can only be hoped, will be answered in the future by those students and researchers sure to be inspired by Strasser’s fine book.

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